Native Prairie UPDATE

VOLUME 15 - WINTER 2002

Hello Voluntary Stewards!

And welcome to the 280 new voluntary stewards who have joined us over the summer of 2002. Now over 1050 voluntary stewards have made stewardship agreements to conserve over 420,000 acres of native prairie, 162 miles of waterways, and 9000 acres of wetlands in Saskatchewan!

It has been a very busy summer for our staff. Not only have they had to adjust to the change from the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation to the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, but they have also been busy signing up voluntary stewards, setting up demonstration projects, and holding workshops and field days.

In addition to write-ups about some of our demonstration projects, inside you will find an article about one of our Voluntary Stewards who borrowed our pull-behind 4-foot seed harvester. If you would like to try collecting native seed so you can seed some of your own land back to native species, please call Shelanne at (306) 787-0918. Not only can she arrange for you to borrow the harvester, but she can also help you determine when you should harvest based on the species that you want to collect.

If you have any questions or comments about anything you read in the Prairie Update, or if you have suggestions for articles you would like to see, please give us a call, write us a letter, or send an e-mail. We'd love to hear from you.

-Jennifer Lohmeyer

Management Plan Produces Economic and Environmental Benefits

by Tracy Harrison

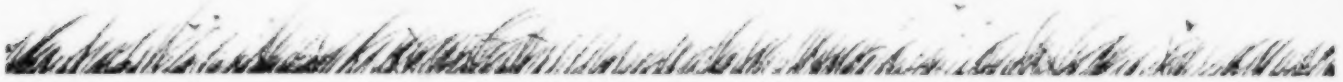
Duane Thompson along with sons Adam (left) & Cole (middle)

A Kelliher, Sask. producer with cattle near the Whitesand River has struck a successful balance in his livestock operation. By "managing for optimums," both environmentally and economically, Duane Thompson has improved his bottom line and nurtured valuable habitat areas.

Thompson, who purchased six quarters of land in the Yorkton-Canora area over the past 10 years said, *"We make our living off the land and of course we have the best interests of the land at heart."*

While the Thompson's 3,500 acre family operation is mostly based near Kelliher, they have given special consideration to the management of their pasture land near the river. The six quarters have been subdivided into a 14-paddock grazing system to pasture 100 head of cattle from June 1 through to the end of October. In addition, as a riparian demonstration project, they developed four remote watering sites through the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation's *Prairie Stewardship Program.* The Corporation is now part of the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority.

But after all that work - they have now sold it to a buyer with a strong interest in the environmental qualities of the property.



"There's a half section where the Whitesand River runs right along and it's really good wildlife land," said Thompson. *"And Saskatchewan Environment was very interested."*

Explaining his reasons for selling, Thompson said, *"I had the opportunity to purchase land right close to our place here and just simple cowboy arithmetic told me if I could sell the land and get a good dollar for it - it would be the best decision to have land closer here."*

Through a short-term agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Development Fund (Saskatchewan Environment), however, Thompson will continue to manage the Whitesand property.

"Part of the purchase deal is that I get three years of grazing on it. But I feel strongly that I can show them that responsible stewardship and proper grazing management can create a very win-win atmosphere for both of us in the future."

But the benefits of his cowboy logic are already showing. Along with accolades from riparian specialists - Thompson's project has garnered the interest of landowners who stop to kick the dirt during field days and tours.

"I've had the director of the Grazing and Pasture Technology Program out there, Zoheir Abouguendia, when GAPT was still in place - as well as Tom Harrison (Watershed Authority) and other people who just felt that the riparian area was in really nice shape"

"And I guess what really backed it up was the very first year that I was involved with the Watershed Authority - they did a species count. We're quite proud to say, they found the most diversity of species along our riparian area. And that, I feel, is not despite our management program but because of it."

"We were quite happy with that because that was even before our involvement with them."

Thompson said he joined the riparian stewardship program after he saw that more could be done.

"After going on a Watershed Authority tour, I saw some of the projects they had done with other producers and other pasture groups and the waterline project really caught my eye."

As a participant in the Whitesand River Watershed Enhancement initiative - spearheaded by the former Wetland Corporation and the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration in 1999 - Thompson was one of several producers to become involved in projects including remote watering site development, buffer strip seeding, corral relocation and grazing management.

Thompson said the program was a perfect fit because the success of his paddock system was limited by water.

"I wasn't happy with that. The riparian area was in very good shape for the most part - and I limited (livestock) access to small areas - but they had to travel a long ways. In some places it was kind of mucky going and we had to use alleys to get the cattle to the river."

To provide water in new locations, Thompson took advantage of another water source in addition to the river. *"There's a yard site there that has a shallow well right close to the river. And we've got power and running water and a pressure system all at the site."*

"And so we just tapped into that system - and plowed in I guess, two-and-a-half miles of one-and-a-half inch poly-pipe and created four water sites where we can take water out to paddocks that did not have water before."

"The water sites are removed from the river but I do have two river paddocks. When the cattle are in a river paddock, they're in there using the river as their water source but they're only in each one for five days in the spring - and then maybe another seven to ten days in the fall."

Thompson concluded the new management plan has "really worked out well."

"It made a great deal of difference to the grass because the cattle grazed the paddocks more evenly and spent less time travelling. I'm certain that I was getting a great deal more return on my investment with the cattle grazing more efficiently and making better use of the grass farther away from the river."

As for another spinoff of this investment, Thompson also found that he could provide his children with the perfect place to learn about living in tune with nature.

"I really love to go up with the kids and go fishing in the river. And I love to go up and hunt and be amongst the wildlife and in nature," said Thomson who shares his interests with his wife Paula and children Cole10, Shelagh 8, Holly 6 and Adam 4.

Other activities demonstrate that Thompson has the best interests of the environment at heart including his involvement with the environmental award committee for a provincial livestock organization. Through this venue, he hopes more people will become aware of the contribution landowners make to conserving natural resources.

"With the Saskatchewan Stockgrowers Association, I was the chair of The Environmental Stewardship Award (TESA) for two years. When you go around the country and you see real good stewardship and responsible grazing and what not - you really see that farmers and ranchers were really the first environmentalists," said Thompson.

Reflecting on the growing presence of conservation groups and environmental agencies on the agricultural landscape, Thompson said the key to saving habitat for the future lies in the simple first step of seeking landowner input.

"I think if they use the carrot approach and show that the majority of guys have the best interest of the environment at heart

- it would set a good example," said Thompson, favoring a proactive approach over enforcement or restrictive measures.

He concluded, *"The former Wetland Corporation helped me fund my project - but that wasn't the only reason I got involved with them. It was their attitude that it was a win-win deal that just impressed me."*

"I really felt that they were very interested in me accomplishing my goals as well as them attaining theirs. And that really is so important . . . they didn't throw a lot of heavy handed incumbrancies on the program. They knew the most important thing is that it's economical for me." ■

Volunteer Sector Survey

The Volunteer Sector Initiative (VSI) is a project designed to increase information sharing among volunteers in Saskatchewan with the goal of improving riparian health and water quality in Saskatchewan. The project will increase the knowledge and capacity of volunteer groups in Saskatchewan interested in conserving and enhancing habitat. As part of the project a survey of volunteers in the province is being conducted to determine the needs of volunteers. The VSI survey has already been sent out to over 2000 volunteers in the province. If you did not receive a survey and would like to fill one out you can visit the website at www.wetland.sk.ca or call the SWA Regina office (306) 787-0782 and one will be mailed out to you. The surveys must be returned by January 15th, 2003 to be included in the analysis. The results of the survey will be posted on the website in the spring.

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Landowner Plans to Restore Native Prairie for Wildlife

by Tracy Harrison

Karin McEwen

Karin McEwen has big plans for a small place.

Through the Prairie Stewardship Program and funding from Environment Canada's EcoAction program, McEwen plans to seed a 10 acre parcel of land to a mixture of native prairie grass species.

Located in the heart of the Missouri Coteau, north of Central Butte and just two miles from Lake Diefenbaker, this parcel of land is actually part of 40 acres that McEwen has called home since 1983.

"Eventually, I would like to see the whole 40 acres - or as much as possible - put back to native prairie," she said.

Although McEwen works as a social worker in the Moose Jaw area, and is busy finishing her university degree - she has a strong attachment to her home in the country. Originally, she and her husband Ken farmed in the area. Although they quit farming and Ken started a trucking company with their son Dale, they decided that moving was not going to be a part of their changing lifestyle.

With their house centrally located on the highest part of their land, the McEwens grew to love the view offered by their surroundings. A natural dip around it used to hold water in better years and attract waterfowl. Different types of plant life could also be found near the water.

"I always thought that we should do something to encourage wildlife and some natural plant growth," said McEwen, adding that prior to learning about the help available through the Prairie Stewardship Program, she had inquired about native grass seed elsewhere.

"I phoned a place and asked, 'How do I go about seeding this and how much does it cost me?' And they said, 'Anywhere from $100 to $600 an acre.' And I left it at that."

When Shelanne Wiles, agrologist with the Watershed Authority came to visit, she found the project to have great potential because of McEwen's obvious commitment and willingness to learn about restoring habitat.

Wiles said, *"I think it's going to be a good project because she has got a really good conservation value and she's really interested in doing this. And I think it will be good to put this land back to native grass because we see so many of our grasses gone now.*

"And even though it is only a little bit - it is something and it is nice to see people with an interest in trying to put land back to - not just tame grass - but native grass to make it more like what it used to be."

Grass species they plan to seed include Needle and Thread Grass, Western Porcupine, Blue Grama, Northern Wheatgrass, June Grass, Western Wheatgrass, Green Needle Grass, Slender Wheat Grass and Canada Wild Rye.

"And then we're including a mixture of forbs as well," said Wiles, noting the actual seeding will be done by someone who has been hired to come out with a Truax drill seeder.

"There's a lot of challenges just because native grass is really hard to establish," she added. *"You have to have the right conditions. This area was really good for site preparation because it was in crop rotation for the last 10 years - so we didn't have to do much. It's really important that the site is ready and that it's free of weeds."*

As for McEwen herself - being a Prairie Steward is something she is ready for. For years she has already been working on her own "yard enhancement" projects.

"There would be a lot more there now if I hadn't started working in Moose Jaw," she joked, adding that when they first moved to the farm *"It was all summerfallow and not a tree on the place."*

But with the influence of family, McEwen pursued her passion for getting close to nature.

"My husband has really encouraged me. He's the one that got me into trees. And when I was growing up, my mom was a real nature lover and animal person too."

Following in her mother's footsteps, McEwen describes herself as someone who has become a "heavy duty bird watcher" over the past 12 years.

"I'm always running around putting houses up and putting stuff out for the birds and trying to make the yard a pleasant place to come. I try to attract birds and I don't try to kill the bugs," she said, noting she takes the same approach to managing her lawn.

"I don't care if I don't have Kentucky Blue grass," she said, adding she avoids the use of sprays and mows whatever grows. *"It looks green from a distance - And if you've got dandelions you've got lots of goldfinches around."*

McEwen concluded that she would like to see more efforts by other landowners to adopt wildlife friendly management practices and conserve what habitat they may have left - even if an area amounts to nothing more than a patch of remnant prairie or a small slough.

"Burrowing Owls were one of my big things over the past years. There used to be lots of Burrowing Owls around there and there's none now," she said, noting that she doesn't like to see a decrease in any species.

"I do what I can in my little corner of the world. And even though it's not a very big corner, I just want to provide a place for animals to come and birds to come, and for the natural plants that would grow there to thrive again - because that's what used to be there."

SWA Supports Student Leadership Development

by Ross Macdonald

The Saskatchewan Watershed Authority has donated $1000 to the Society for Range Management's Prairie Parkland Chapter to support the Student Leadership Development Initiative.

Significant interest exists at the U of S among students for the creation of a Range Management club, however, the organization of such a club has been impeded by lack of resources. This project consists of hiring a part-time coordinator to organize the club activities. The second component of this project involves providing students with a leadership development opportunity by sending a range management team to the international competition in Casper, Wyoming. This competition held in conjunction with the SRM Annual Meeting, will provide the U of S Students with the opportunity to challenge themselves at the international level and represent Saskatchewan to the world. Students will have the opportunity to access international expertise and successes in range management. The contacts made at this conference will provide future leadership direction, research opportunities and peer reference support. All of these aspects will better prepare students for the diverse issues dealt with in the socially and environmentally demanding world of range management. These students are the province's future land owners, managers and legislators. Providing a global exposure to our local issues can only enhance their ability to develop stewardship ethic and the expertise to responsibly manage Saskatchewan's land and water resources.

For more information on this program call:
Ross Macdonald at (306) 447-4600 or E-mail: rsmacd@sasktel.net

Fish and Wildlife Development Fund supports Prairie Stewardship Program

by Tracy Harrison

Brad Pattinson

When a project is developed through the Prairie Stewardship Program, many of you already know that a great deal of time and effort is put into planning details such as seeding, fencing or setting up a remote livestock watering site.

But in some ways that's the "easy" part. Finding ways to cover the cost of a project also requires special consideration. And that's why we would like to highlight the importance of partnerships.

When projects are initiated through the Prairie Stewardship Program, funding may come from a variety of sources. Some of these are listed on the back page. In some cases, projects are undertaken in partnership with other organizations, while other projects are funded through one-time government programs.

The "support" we would like to profile in this issue is the ***Fish and Wildlife Development Fund***. This fund, which operates through Saskatchewan Environment, has been a valuable part of our Prairie Stewardship Program for more than five years.

During this time, many successful stewardship projects have taken root. One of these, developed by Henry and Bill Seidlitz of Bethune, was even recognized provincially with The Environmental Stewardship Award in 2001. Through their project, Henry and Bill created a rest-rotation grazing system for their pasture along the Arm River. By doing so, they have been able to provide rest for native plants species and reduce livestock disturbance in an important spawning area for northern pike.

Brad Pattinson, chairman of the Fish and Wildlife Development Fund steering committee says that since the fund's inception, it has evolved greatly to support a variety of enhancement projects such as this all over the province.

Pattinson said, *"The concept of the Fund was established in 1969 when the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation asked for a $1 impost on hunting and fishing licenses as a source of revenue for buying more habitat. And then in the early 80s - the fisheries side was rolled into it and it went from a $1 impost to a percentage of the license fee of hunting and angling licenses."* Pattinson said that today, 30 per cent of all license sales go into this fund. Generating approximately $3 million per year, the fund has allowed for the purchase of 200,000 acres of habitat land in addition to supporting enhancement work.

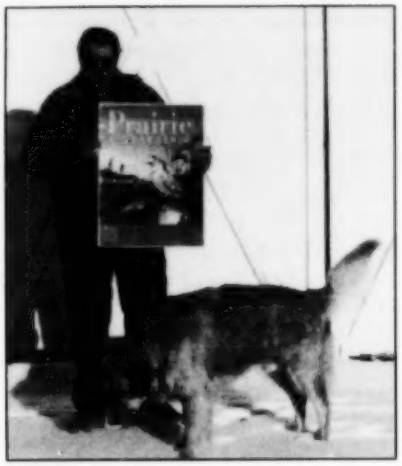
Winterfat (Eurotia lanata)

Winterfat (Eurotia lanata) is a low shrubby plant growing 10 to 50 cm tall. The gray bark becomes flaky with age. Leaves have a grayish to rusty hue due to a dense covering of hairs. It could be mistaken for a sage plant, except that the strong sage scent is lacking. Small flowers are covered in silky hairs. Winterfat is an exceptional food plant for livestock and game, keeping a high nutrient and mineral content into the winter. It is common to dry grasslands as well as heavy clay soils.

Drawing from Budd's Flora of the Canadian Prairie Provinces, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Reproduced with permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2001.

Outlook Producer Restores Native Lands

by Tracy Harrison



Gordon Silverthorn

When a small parcel of cultivated land came up for sale along the South Saskatchewan River, Gordon Silverthorn of Outlook, Sask. knew he had to buy it - not for farming - but for restoring native prairie.

"I would like to see something remain of 'what used to be' 100 years ago before the big rush to break it and colonize Western Canada," said Silverthorn.

Having grown up in the area, Silverthorn's motive for restoring this particular piece of land is also rooted in a personal history.

"It's a small tract of land along the river that I've passed by all my life," he said, of the 11-acres bordering the river's west side.

It was originally owned by Mr. Nels A. Rudy who ran a store and Post Office on the east bank of the river. Part of Mr. Rudy's quarter was on each side of the river, both adjacent to the Hanley Ferry site which crossed the South Saskatchewan River. The Post Office was "Rudy, Saskatchewan," and the crossing became known as the Rudy Ferry.

"This tract of land was native and Mr. Rudy never broke it. It remained in native long after the Browning area was all broken and farmed. And eventually, possibly in the late 50s, someone broke the native grass."

"I remember quite well as a younger person at the time - it bothered me to see this small tract - rather useless as being of any farm value - being broken up. Why bother breaking up a little patch like that? Why didn't they leave it alone? Now, I want to put it back to native again and let the wildlife have it," he said, noting the land can be much more productive if it is returned to its natural state.

With the ability to withstand the of heat of summer and the extreme cold of a prairie winter - native plants are an integral part of a healthy prairie landscape. Their deep binding roots can reach moisture that other plants do not. And as part of a healthy watershed, native species also serve to filter contaminants found in runoff.

While native prairie is more attractive as habitat for wildlife, it also provides benefits for those in the livestock industry. Compared to tame forages, native prairie grasses retain their nutritional qualities much later in the grazing season.

Familiar with the benefits of native plant species, Silverthorn says he is disappointed that more people are not aware of its values. *"I find it annoying when agencies or organizations that deal with land in one way or another refer to what's left of our native ground as wasteland. There's no such thing. I always stroke out the word 'wasteland' and write in 'native ground.'"*

In addition to the native species he plans to seed through his restoration project, Silverthorn appreciates the opportunity to own native prairie that has been in his family since 1906.

"We still have some on various parts of our farm. Obviously it was not suitable for farming or my parents or grandparents would have broken it up years ago," he said, adding *"My grandfather homesteaded just south of where we're living."*

To do his restoration project, he will build upon his experiences in operating a seed farm, called Silverthorn's Seeds Ltd, and managing his existing prairie.

Along with help from his wife Autumn and son Kyle, Silverthorn processes and sells both cultivated forage seeds and seeds from cereal crops. The family's 2,000 acre farm is also comprised of 1,200 acres of cultivated land with the balance made up of forages and native prairie.

And although they haven't had livestock for years, Silverthorn has already seen the benefits of using grazing as a management tool for their native species.

"The native, for the most part, I just kind of leave alone. I just enjoy the diverse plants that are there," he said. *"But this year, our neighbors were pretty short of pasture so I did let them pasture it and I think it was a good move. It's beneficial to the native prairie to be eaten off or trampled down slightly just like it used to be by the buffalo 200 years ago."*

While management of existing pasture is easy enough, Silverthorn said that preparing his new site for re-establishment is much more challenging.

"It's extremely difficult because the so-called cultivated grasses are very invasive. And this is what I'm finding along the river bank right now. They were not planted there - but they are continuing to encroach upon what I want to return to native. So I'm going to have to make an attempt to hold them back," he said.

In the meantime, he does have the seed

already, and he credits the assistance he received through the Prairie Stewardship Program and its staff.

"I very much appreciated the use of their seed harvesting machine - and their encouragement," he said. *"Without it I would have obtained very little seed. As it was, I was able to harvest what I think is enough to seed down the entire 11 acres next spring."*

Silverthorn estimates that harvesting by hand, he would have only collected enough seed for one or two acres. *"It would have taken 10 years to do it that way."*

He noted that the types of species he will be seeding, however, will be limited in variety, because he did not buy any seed or harvest in a variety of locations. Instead, he did all of his own seed harvesting along the river bank where some native plants were still growing. He added that to give the project an extra boost, he also intends to transplant clumps of sod, or "plugs," as he calls them.

"The Blue Grama grass is going to be the predominant one because its the one that's growing on that area right now. I think the others will come in with a little bit of encouragement."

Silverthorn pointed out that in addition to being harder to come by, native species are also harder to seed than the most forages.

"It's a challenge to seed them through conventional equipment," he said. *"Native seeds are much different than the so-called cultivated grasses. They shatter readily, they're small, tiny and light weight. For the most part, they also have a lot of awns. Which, depending on how you're going to broadcast them or replant them, need to be buffed off."*

But he hopes that any future efforts to improve the seeding of any native species won't interfere with the qualities of the native seed itself.

"I think we have to learn other ways of dealing with them and the use of them more as a natural thing rather than trying to turn them into cultivated seeds," said Silverthorn, who is wary about any efforts to cultivate native seeds and create named varieties.

"It's still the same type with the same latin name - but it's cultivated. So is it native anymore? That's why I try to harvest what is native there and not improve it - just use what nature gave us," he said.

Ultimately, Silverthorn hopes that more people will share his enjoyment of nature's gifts and place a greater value on native prairie that they own. Because once it's gone, it's a lot harder to get back.

"I certainly would encourage anyone that has any native land to preserve it and anyone that has parcels of land that they consider wasteland - to make an attempt to put it back to native plants. Not only grasses - but native plant species in general. But definitely, if they have native land, don't destroy it."

Populations of the McCown's Longspur have declined since the early 1900's due to loss of breeding and wintering habitat through fire exclusion and conversion of native prairie to cropland. Current populations trends are uncertain as this species is poorly sampled by existing surveys.

McCown'sLongspur (Calcarius mccownii)

Identification

During the summer males have a gray face with black crown and moustache, gray nape, white throat, and black crescent on the breast. The chestnut-coloured wing patches and white tail with an inverted black T are especially noticeable in flight. Females are more drab and pale overall, with some chestnut colouring on the wings. The male displays by flying up above his territory, then floating down on outstretched wings while singing his delicate, tinkling territorial song.

Habitat Preference

McCown's Longspurs are one of the few rivals to Horned Larks in their preference for short grass and bare ground. These longspurs prefer very open, grazed grasslands, short grass prairie and summer fallow fields. Shrubby cover is avoided. Individuals often use sparsely vegetated hilltops for displaying and nesting. Early in the breeding season, nests are often placed on south facing slopes. Winter habitat is similar to that of summer, with the addition of freshly plowed and bare fields.

Did You Know?

- This bird leaves its wintering grounds in late February or early March and arrives on the Saskatchewan breeding grounds in April and May.
- Nesting begins by mid-May.
- The nest consists of a simple grass structure, placed next to a grass tuft in an area of very sparse plant cover.

Coming Events

Western Range Science Seminar
January 19 to 21, 2003
Medicine Hat, Alberta
For further information contact the Lethbridge Research Centre at (403) 327-4561

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Saskatchewan Stock Growers' Association Semi-Annual Meeting
Friday January 24, 2003
In conjunction with the Sask. Livestock Convention
Radisson Hotel, Saskatoon, SK
Please call (306) 757-8523 for further information

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76th Annual Sask. Livestock Convention
January 24 - 26, 2003
Radisson Hotel, Saskatoon SK
Call (306) 757-6133

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Prairie Conservation Action Plan Meeting
January 29-30, 2003
Temple Garden Spa, Moose Jaw, SK
For more information call (306) 352-0472

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Eco-Extravaganza Rural School Workshops
Week of Feb 10th and Week of Feb 24th, 2003
Maple Creek, Eastend,Consul, Tompkins, Piapot, Hazlet, Fox Valley, Golden Prairie, Leader, Birstall, Richmound, Abbey, Cabri, Steward Valley and Success.
For more information call (306) 352-0472

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Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA) Convention
February 2 - 5, 2003
Saskatoon, Centennial Auditorium
Call (306) 525-3727 for further information

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Native Plant Society Annual Meeting and Workshop
February 20-22, 2003
Manitou Springs Resort and Spa, Watrous SK
Call (306) 668-3940

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Visit our website
www.wetland.sk.ca

Expanded role for SWCC

The Saskatchewan Watershed Authority officially came into existence on October 1, 2002. The Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation is now part of that Authority. The new entity will focus on watershed management with a mandate to manage and protect water quantity and source water quality. Although our name has changed, our commitment to working with producers on projects which not only benefit individual operations, but also contribute to healthy watersheds for other residents has not changed. We look forward to working with you in the months ahead.

For habitat stewardship information, please contact us at:
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Share Your Ideas . . .

Anyone with story ideas or coming events is welcome to share them with us at:

Attention: Jennifer Lohmeyer
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- Agricultural Environmental Stewardship Initiative

Canada Millenium Partnership Program
Canada Trust Friends of the Environment Foundation
Canadian Wildlife Service and World Wildlife Fund through:
- Endangered Species Recovery Fund

Ducks Unlimited Canada
Environment Canada through Eco-ACTION
Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (U.S.)
Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management through:
- Fish and Wildlife Development Fund

SaskPower Shand Greenhouse
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